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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5285
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1175
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9942
RUEHKKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4367
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1828
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3563
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0525
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7041
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4660
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0937
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0941
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0671
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2890
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0542
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001521

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BM

SUBJECT: A WHITE REVOLUTION IN BURMA?

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Detained pro-democracy leaders Min Ko Naing, Htay Kywe, and Ko Ko Gyi contacted members of their organization via cell phone on October 12, instructing them to begin demanding that the GOB release them. Meanwhile, the 88 Generation Students have obtained over 210,000 signatures for their petition campaign and publicly encourage Burmese citizens to wear white until Min Ko Naing's 44th birthday on October 18. The 88 Generation's interim leadership has decided against holding mass demonstrations, but rather will launch a grass-roots political campaign, based on a strategy they used in prison, to encourage Burmese to unite at local levels and demand that authorities adhere to the rule of law.
End Summary.

¶2. (C) On the evening of October 12 three of the detained 88 Generation Student leaders obtained access to cell phones and called members of their organization. Min Ko Naing and Htay Kywe separately called acting 88 Generation leader Mya Aye. Min Ko Naing told Mya Aye he will demand that regime authorities tell him how long they planned to detain him and provide him with a date of release for all five leaders. If the authorities refused to provide this information, Min Ko Naing said he will telephone Mya Aye with further instructions. Ko Ko Gyi called a close associate and instructed him that the families should begin to sue the government for their sons' release. Mya Aye is currently consulting lawyers on how to proceed.

¶3. (C) Meanwhile, the 88 Generation's signature campaign continues to gain momentum and the interim leadership is formulating a long-term strategy to promote peaceful political change. The students have collected over 210,000 signatures to date and have initiated a public "color

campaign," encouraging all who support the leaders' release to wear white shirts from now until October 18, Min Ko Naing's forty-fourth birthday. Because of the initial success of the signature campaign, the Students have decided to extend the deadline an extra week, until October 23rd. 88 Generation leaders have informed us that after the campaign is over, the leadership plans to present the petitions to the U.S. Embassy to be passed to USUN Ambassador Bolton as a way to demonstrate the Burmese public's support for true national reconciliation rather than the regime's sham National Convention. If the National Convention is concluded and the regime holds a fixed referendum, the students plan to present the signatures again to show the people's opposition to the regime's manipulated "roadmap to democracy."

¶4. (C) The interim leaders told us they have collectively decided not to hold mass demonstrations. Instead they have prepared a strategy to peacefully protest the detentions within the law. Former political prisoner and 88 Generation Student leader "Jimmy" told us their new campaign will resemble a strategy they used in prison to convince prison guards and wardens to give them the rights entitled to prisoners under Burmese law. In prison, political prisoners passed knowledge of the laws on to their non-political cell mates and encouraged them to unify and approach the prison authorities in a non-threatening manner to point out the rights they were entitled to under the law, asking that they be respected. After several discussions between prisoners and the guards, many prisoners received better treatment and more freedom to associate and carry out political discussions. Guards would sometimes even allow political prisoners to hold small memorial ceremonies commemorating the August 88 pro-democracy uprising.

¶5. (C) The students plan to combine this strategy with knowledge they have gained from human rights and community

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workshops they have attended at the American Center and British Council to begin building political opposition at the grass-roots level. Jimmy told us Su Su Nwe's village will serve as a model for this strategy. Her township has an unusual amount of political activists and extraordinary unity. Her home village has consistently stood behind Su Su Nwe and referred to Burmese law to challenge the local authorities' demands for illegal forced labor. Because the people are so unified, local authorities have been less abusive to the villagers. The more the community educated itself about the protections it is entitled to under Burmese law, the more unified and empowered it became. The 88 Generation Students plan to use contacts they have developed in villages throughout the country to educate people about the rule of law and their rights under Burmese law. If their plan is successful, they hope Burmese citizens will begin to use this greater awareness to unite and demand more respect for their rights from local authorities. If the public is less divided, Jimmy said, the SPDC officials will be less able to abuse their authority.

¶6. (C) Jimmy said the signature and color campaigns are the first step of the Students' new strategy. Their campaigns are designed to test the political mood of the Burmese people and analyze the effectiveness of their organization. It will also test the capacity of their campaigners and their ability to draw out the public's desire for political change. They have been pleasantly surprised by their success so far. Jimmy said the students deliberately chose white for their color campaign because it is the standard color for most student and civil service uniforms. This would introduce an advantageous note of ambiguity, giving cover to those who wanted to participate, but were afraid. In this way, people could tell authorities that they are only wearing their standard uniform knowing themselves that they also supported the detained leaders.

¶7. (C) Comment: 88 Generation Student leaders recognize that

their strategy must be long-term and may not produce immediate change, but the 210,000 signatures they have collected and unanticipated early success of their color campaign have encouraged and emboldened them. The Indian Ambassador commented to the Charge that the Students' success had surprised him and revealed much greater willingness to challenge the authorities. After an initial period of panic when their most important leaders were arrested, they rallied and began to develop realistic strategies for grass-roots level political change in Burma. As their efforts succeed, others are joining their cause. Last week two NLD youth activists in Bago Division were detained by authorities after successfully convincing an entire village to sign the Students' petitions. These small victories show that the students refuse to be intimidated, and that a more united and active opposition in Burma is emerging. End comment.

VILLAROSA